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Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874-1936)

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Gilbert K. Chesterton wrote a prodigious number of poems and essays on various subjects, and wrote exceedingly well. For more information, check the [American Chesterton Society](#) website. I was introduced to G. K. Chesterton through his being frequently quoted by the “spiritual entertainer” Alan Watts.

It is a special kind of enlightenment to have this feeling that the usual, the way things normally are, is odd—uncanny and highly improbable. G. K. Chesterton once said that it is one thing to be amazed at a gorgon or a griffin, creatures which do not exist; but it is quite another and much higher thing to be amazed at a rhinoceros or a giraffe, creatures which do exist and look as if they don't.

— Chapter I, *The Book: on the taboo against knowing who you are*, Alan Watts, 1966

This was a paraphrase of something G. K. Chesterton wrote. The following are the exact words quoted more accurately by Watts in his *Lecture on G. K. Chesterton* which I have as an audio file. In that talk, Watts says it comes from “one of the rarer books of Chesterton” called *The Coloured Lands*. When I searched for the text on the internet, one source I found shows it as being from [Chapter 1](#) of *Orthodoxy*, a 1908 book by Chesterton, but I also found it on [another page](#) mainly in German that cites the preface to the posthumous (“Im Vorwort des posthumen”) *The Coloured Lands* published in 1938:

It is one thing to describe an interview with a gorgon or a griffin, a creature who does not exist. It is another thing to discover that the rhinoceros does exist and then take pleasure in the fact that he looks as if he didn't.

I heard the following poem quoted by Alan Watts in “The Joker,” one of his talks.

Chattering finch and water-fly
Are not merrier than I;
Here among the flowers I lie
Laughing everlastingly.
No: I may not tell the best;
Surely, friends, I might have guessed
Death was but the good King's jest,
It was hid so carefully.

— THE SKELETON, *The Wild Knight and Other Poems*, Gilbert K. Chesterton, 1900

Alan Watts quotes the following verse in “The Drama of It All” in the 1976 book *The essential Alan Watts*. It is interesting because it can be read as expressing the eastern philosophy of each of us being a mask of God, that is to say, each of us as a manifestation of divine consciousness. Note that G. K. Chesterton was

very much a Christian. GOLD LEAVES has four verses; I only quote the third verse here.

But now a great thing in the street
Seems any human nod,
Where shift in strange democracy
The million masks of God.

— GOLD LEAVES, *The Wild Knight and Other Poems*, Gilbert K. Chesterton, 1900

Some one-liners from Gilbert K. Chesterton

Coincidences are spiritual puns. — *Irish Impressions*, Gilbert K. Chesterton, 1919

One may understand the cosmos, but never the ego; the self more distant than any star. — Chapter 4, *Orthodoxy*, Gilbert K. Chesterton, 1908

The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried. — Chapter 5, *What's Wrong With The World*, Gilbert K. Chesterton, 1910

No man who worships education has got the best out of education... Without a gentle contempt for education no man's education is complete. — *The Superstition of School*, essay by Gilbert K. Chesterton, 1923

The word “good” has many meanings. For example, if a man were to shoot his grandmother at a range of five hundred yards, I should call him a good shot, but not necessarily a good man. — Gilbert K. Chesterton

Thieves respect property. They merely wish the property to become their property that they may more perfectly respect it. — *The Man Who Was Thursday: A Nightmare*, Gilbert K. Chesterton, 1908

Poets have been mysteriously silent on the subject of cheese. — Chapter 9, *Alarms and discursions*, Gilbert K. Chesterton, 1910

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